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STEPHEN MORRIS OF NEW ORDER BY KEVIN CUMMINS

RUDOLPH
VALENTINO
'THE EAGLE'
VILMA BANKY and LOUISE DRESSER
A CLARENCE BROWN PRODUCTION
BAD GIRL
ANGER
AMOS

Child star, avant-garde film-maker and author of *Hollywood Babylon*, still the most lovingly hateful expose of the cardboard glamour of Tinseltown ever written, KENNETH ANGER is a figure shrouded in mystery. James Truman visited him at home (opposite) in New York, where he lives surrounded by the debris of the silver screen, his own projects – such as a film based on the work of Aleister Crowley – stymied by a sinister fate. Photos Kate Simon

A LOOK BACK AT ANGER

JAMES TRUMAN
NEW YORK

Kenneth Anger's taste in Kenneth Anger begins at home, a fourth floor walk-up in the East 90s, at the start of that faceless quarter-mile stretch where Manhattan's Upper East Side takes pause before peeling off into Harlem. It's less a boundary than a point of accidental collision. These are two different worlds, neither of them Anger's, but (O poetic licence) just as opposed and contrary as the several different worlds he does himself inhabit.

If there's one Kenneth Anger out *there*, immersed in Crowley's myths and magick and things he can't, or won't, explain, there's at least one more in here, submerged in the shrieking colours and shapes of Old Hollywood revisited. Anger owns one of *the* great collections of cinema memorabilia. An inventory would run to pages. There's the neon RKO sign that used to stand outside Radio City Music Hall, the shrine to Valentino, the original Ruscha painting of the Hollywood sign, the dozens of autographed pin-ups and studio give-aways and personal effects.

You get the impression that he could sell you his *toothbrush* as the one that cleaned Olivia de Havilland's teeth before she kissed Errol Flynn in the final reel of one of their old potboilers. This thing will go on forever: the assorted junk and dreams and memories of old celluloid – *blessed* celluloid, as Myra had it. The hero/heroine of Gore Vidal's novel, *Myra Breckinridge*, had herself surgically rebuilt as a composite of every screen goddess that had haunted her early life as a man. She then declared war on the world for being less glamorous than she was, and less glamorous than it used to be.

Hollywood Babylon, Anger's great slander catalogue, has always seemed based on similar sentiments. Part satire, part pure bitchery – he is a brilliant gossip stylist – it revealed a degree of fascination that ultimately made the book into an article of worship, for the old days.

Old Hollywood, the Hollywood of the pioneers, of Valentino and Clara Bow, is the only Hollywood he cares about. Too young to have known it first hand, he's lived it vicariously from an early age. As a child in California, he heard the stories from his grandmother, who worked as a costume mistress at United Artists. "Instead of fairy tales, she used to tell me stories about the days of silent movies. She really started my interest."

She also secured his one and only Hollywood screen appearance, as the Changeling Prince in Max Reinhardt's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The film died a death, but it set the young Anger – who wasn't then Anger, but he won't say what – onto his own career. Between the age of 11 and 16 he made seven short films. Never shown in public, they've become shrouded in mystery. Some say they're lost, others that they were among the films that Anger publicly burned in 1967, shortly before he took out a full page ad in the *Village Voice* announcing his death. His sense of humour is the wildest. He now admits that the films are all in storage; he just doesn't want to show them.

In 1947, at the age of 17, he made *Fireworks*, a dazzling preface to his later work – *Scorpio Rising* in particular – and the opening chapter in the Magick Lantern Cycle, the collection of his work that regularly plays the art-house circuit. Morbid and trance-like, *Fireworks* also has a wonderfully satiric edge. Its hero (Kenneth Anger) wanders into a

dream where he gets ritually beaten up by a gang of sailors. The violence is graphic, but the more graphic it gets the more Anger lets fly with a madly overplayed erotic symbolism. Finally his penis becomes a fizzing roman candle. From a 17-year-old, this can seem a rather precocious view of sexual fantasy.

Obviously this sort of filth wasn't a big hit at home. *Fireworks*' first public screening was actually in France, in 1949, as part of a festival of *film maudit*. The jury, headed by Jean Cocteau, awarded it a prize. Cocteau wrote Anger a fan letter, and Anger came to Europe.

He sat out most of the next decade there, while the right-wing censorship purges raged across America. France was an easier place to work in at the time, he recalls. Even so, and even in the context of a career littered with mishaps, the period wasn't especially productive. Production on *Rabbit's Moon*, an Anger-Cocteau collaboration, ground to a halt through lack of funds, and the film remained unfinished for over twenty years. A projected film of Lautreamont's *Maldoror* never got past the rehearsal stage. Anger's version of *The Story Of O* collapsed after one of the actors turned out to be involved in a kidnapping.

The single film he did complete in Europe was *Eaux d'Artifice*, a dreamy, baroque period-piece shot amongst the fountains and gargoyles of the Tivoli Gardens in Rome. Its fleeting montages and floating rhythms, synchronised to Vivaldi, made this his most visually stunning film, and the first to forge

what was then a revolutionary relation between soundtrack and screen image.

Scorpio Rising, made on his return to America in 1962, took this to a conclusion in which the soundtrack (a series of old rock-'n'roll classics) becomes an ironic, parallel narrative to the visual action. Later films like *Easy Rider* and *American Graffiti* would use the same device, though not as effectively.

The reason *Scorpio Rising* is the *only* rock'n'roll film that matters is that it's less about rock'n'roll than the dubious mythology which feeds it. Ostensibly it's about a biker gang's weekend in Coney Island; most of the film was shot live, without rehearsal. "I just asked to photograph their bikes and how they lived," Anger recalls. "I think I was the first person who ever paid any attention to them. They let me do it with very little difficulty." He once described the film as "a death mirror held up to American culture"; a part of the mirror effect is the constant bouncing back of reflections between illusion and reality.

As the camera minutely details the absurd and beautiful rites of male narcissism, other elements in the film react against it. The interspliced scenes of Dean and Brando point up the banality of pop icons (Ken's boys look tougher), the inserts of Hitler suggest their danger. While editing the film, Anger mistakenly – or magically – received through the post a copy of *The Road To Jerusalem*, a grade C Christ movie. Scenes from this went in the film too, forming a wicked counterpoint. One is left wondering whether the Good Lord was a prototype biker, or the bikers low-rent Messiah.

Scorpio's other revelation is its sexuality. In fact its first commercial success was as a dirty-party movie: the closed, boy's-own world of the bikers is richly homo-erotic. As Anger gleefully relates, the most crucial scenes were actually shot with the gang's girls on the set yelling encouragement from behind the camera. As with *Fireworks*, the film is ultimately more about his own erotic and aesthetic quest than about its subject. A true modernist, Anger turns that quest into the content of his film.

In his more recent work it becomes content, form and purpose. *Lucifer Rising*, ten years in the making and still only a third finished, is his grand attempt to unite the ritual magic of movie-making with the mystic-ritual magick of Aleister Crowley, as a kind of transcendent, visionary spectacle. The film is dedicated to Crowley; like his life, its progress has been littered with implausible disasters.

The first edition had to be scrapped after Lucifer, played by a five-year-old boy, leapt off a roof trying to fly. The next Lucifer was Bobby Beausoleil, guitarist with the group Love. He was also contracted to do the soundtrack. Following a dispute over money he broke into the studio, stole most of the footage, and made off with Anger's car. The car broke down four hundred miles away outside a secluded ranch in California's Death Valley. The ranch just happened to belong to Charles Manson. Beausoleil is now doing life for complicity in the murder of Sharon Tate. Is this magick?

"I don't see it as purely coincidence. I have to attribute my often quite bumpy path to my interest in magick. It's a part of my life, it's not something that can be turned on and off at random. Often it's round about things that to other people would be flirting with disaster. To the magician it's a question of surmounting disaster, of finding the focus of vision that would enable you to see this," he says.

Anger's footage, meanwhile, is still buried somewhere in the California desert. "A few months after it was stolen some hippie girl came to San Francisco to see me. She said that Charlie had sent her and I could have my film back for 10,000 dollars. At the time I had no idea who he was. I said thanks but no thanks."

He subsequently reshot the film with a new cast in England, Germany and Egypt. This time the film was confiscated (but by whom?) for several years. Anger finally recovered it, edited it down from 90 to 45 minutes, and added a soundtrack Beausoleil had recorded in gaol. It's still less than a third of the intended film; without the rest, and without a proper knowledge of Crowley, you could be excused for finding it impenetrable.

The second chapter, he says, is ready but for editing. So (almost) is *Hollywood Babylon II*. Originally scheduled for last year's Christmas lists, its publication has now been put back to early 1984. Part of the reason is that a burglar broke into Anger's apartment and pinched the manuscript, on – of course – Halloween night. He's now rewriting. Back to Old Hollywood. Kenneth Anger's taste in Kenneth Anger has always been reliable. ■

MINISTRY